Whistle Blowing in the Dark

No two ways about it: the age of the retrospective revelation is in full swing. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has taken the world into his confidence with a story about an operative of the Central Intelligence Agency who offered him a $3-million bribe in 1960, a price—as far as we could make out from the rest of the story—that the prime minister considered insultingly low. From Moscow we are promised chapter and verse on the failings of the world's most famous Harebrained Schemer. The transcript will soon be available of a central committee meeting in which a number of Khrushchev's former confederates performed more or less the same service for him that he once performed for the memory of Joseph Stalin. Even a former U.S. Postmaster General has got into the now-it-can-be-told business with a book complaining of the political pressures that were put upon him when all he was trying to do was deliver the mail. J. Edward Day, who during his Washington term of office was reportedly fighting a losing battle with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and some White House aides over patronage appointments, has at last chosen to confirm the rumor. "One afternoon I talked to him three times by telephone," Day has written by way of documenting his sorrows, "about a single rural letter carrier who was to be appointed in a small town in Mississippi in which Bobby was intensely interested."

While this sort of thing has always raised interesting questions for moral logicians, such as why there was not protest instead of silence—if not collusion—at the time, it has always been of lesser interest to journalists. Not that they underestimate the value of an aggrieved news source or a loser. On the contrary, journalists spend disproportionate amounts of time trying to get such officials to put a few of their pre-memoir discontents on the record. Most politicians, however, prefer the haven of history.

Can all that be changed? Recently, a New York publishing firm has made a heroic if somewhat sneaky try. The firm was G. P. Put-

nam's Sons and the subject was Congressional conflict of interest. Who better than a defeated candidate, Putnam's reasoned, to provide a few clues about the private fortunes of the congressman who had defeated him? The result of these probings was likely to be of considerably more than historical interest as well. "We expect to complete our research," as sales director James B. Adler put it in a letter soliciting information from last year's losers, "in time to publish a book on the subject before the 1966 Congressional campaign."

Mr. Adler's letter found its way into the *Congressional Record*, having been forwarded by former Representative Oliver P. Bolton (R., Ohio) to the man who defeated him, Democratic Representative Robert E. Sweeney. And it was hardly a letter calculated to produce serenity on Capitol Hill. "Obviously, it would be awkward," as Mr. Adler put it, "to seek this information from the congressmen themselves . . . we would appreciate any help you can give us in identifying your opponent's outside business interests and law clients. Has he used his position in Congress, in your opinion, to advance these personal interests? Has he performed any special favors for big campaign contributors?"

If Mr. Bolton's reaction is any guide, the project won't get too far. He professed to believe the subject too important to be opened up to the charges of those "who have a partisan or emotional ax to grind." Moreover, Congressman Sweeney himself became extremely nonpartisan in his remarks about Mr. Bolton. "Mr. Speaker," he said, "I have said publicly and privately on many occasions that my opponent in the fall election of 1964 is a gifted American with a keen understanding of the issues of our day." On the issue of Congressional conflict of interest, it would seem that the keenest view, in Congressman Sweeney's opinion, is that it should be dealt with "by the Congress itself," since "such an inquiry as undertaken by Putnam's could easily lead to smear attacks." There are details about a man in public life that, like wine, must be given time to age in the cellar of history.